



GROWING IN  
*grace*  
Stories *and*  
Reflections *for* Lent

FR. THOMAS J. CONNERY

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## ASH WEDNESDAY

*When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.*

MATTHEW 6:16

**AN 87-YEAR-OLD WOMAN WAS ADMITTED INTO THE HOSPITAL.** The intake nurse asked, “Has your diet changed?”

“Yes,” she replied. “For Lent, I gave up whipped cream on my Jell-O, hard candy and my two beers a night—and look where it’s gotten me!”

So where will Lent get you? If it is only a means to drop a few pounds or quit some uncomfortable habit, then maybe not far enough. There’s nothing wrong in losing weight by our fasting; it’s an extra bonus. Yet it is not the motivation for our fasting.

We want to be more like Jesus. We want, as Matthew Kelly so aptly puts it, to be a better version of ourselves. Lent is that opportunity. Don’t waste it. Choose a Lenten practice for these next 40 days.



*Dear Lord, I know I can  
be better. I want to live  
more like your disciple.  
May this Lent grant  
me the grace and  
motivation that I need.  
I will trust not in myself  
but in your grace. Amen.*



## THURSDAY *after* ASH WEDNESDAY

*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. LUKE 9:23*

**I HEARD ABOUT THIS PREACHER SOME YEARS AGO.** He was a preacher in the Philippine Islands. One day he was passing a large church on Good Friday when he spotted people selling their trinkets, food items and religious articles. There was incense, candles, veils and rosaries for sale. What caught his eye was several small boys selling crosses. In a loud enthusiastic voice they shouted, “Crosses, cheap crosses for sale! Get your cheap cross today!”

Crosses are not cheap. Jesus’ cross certainly wasn’t and ours are not either. The cross is the challenge in following Jesus. We have to say no to our selfish desires. Though often in this world we do not follow God’s values. That can be a challenge. In our pain, we don’t curse our struggles but offer them up in union with Jesus. For the cross leads to life. Not only in the next life, but right *here*.

We live in union with Christ. It is worth the sacrifice.



*Father, so often I want to run from the cross. The truth is, I can't. It will catch up to me. I can complain and curse it, or I can carry it with the grace of your Son. I want to choose the latter. This Lent, when life may not be fair, may I look to your Son, Jesus, and carry my cross with him. Amen.*

## FRIDAY *after* ASH WEDNESDAY

*See, you fast only to quarrel and fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist!*

ISAIAH 58:4

**SOME PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO ACCEPT THEIR NEED FOR CHANGE.** A story is told about a doctor who told a man to give up red meat—and so he stopped putting ketchup on his hamburgers!

Another story: Randy was unsure about his choice of clothes for attending church, so he sought counsel from his wife. He asked, “Do you think I should change?”

She took advantage of the opportunity and replied, “It depends—are you talking about changing your shirt or making a wholesale change as a human being?”

We are not interested in merely changing the externals. We want sincere life-altering corrections. Isaiah the prophet points to our making hard-core adjustments. It is useless to give up some food item if we continue our sinful ways. It's not so much about giving up dessert, as it about giving up backbiting, fighting and holding on to grudges. These must go. If you want, then you can skip dessert as well.



*Father, I am so used to my ways. I have grown comfortable with my lifestyle. I know it is not perfect, but it could be a lot worse. Help me to take a deep, hard look at myself and, with your grace, alter my life. I want a pure heart. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## SATURDAY *after* ASH WEDNESDAY

*Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do.  
I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.*

LUKE 5:31-32

**A MAN CALLED A WRONG PHONE NUMBER AND GOT THE FOLLOWING RECORDING:** “I am not available right now, but I thank you for caring enough to call. I am making some changes in my life. Please leave a message after the beep. If I do not return your call, you are one of the changes.”

Do you ever feel unworthy of God’s love and care? You look over your life and decide that you are not good enough?

God will never cast us aside. No matter what we may have done, how often we may have done it, God will never turn us away. Jesus came especially for those who need help the most. He burns with a fervent desire to bring us back to his Father. On our part, we just need to turn to him and ask for forgiveness. Yes, even if we were to fail again, God will never tire of us.

“God will pardon a repentant sinner more quickly than a mother would snatch her child out of the fire.”—St. John Vianney



*Father, it is hard to accept that you love me, especially when I am at my worst. I have a hard time loving myself. Despite my best intentions, I fail and fail often. This Lent I can't promise to be perfect, but I can promise that I will trust in your mercy. Thank you for accepting me so graciously. May I live the forgiven life. Amen.*

## FIRST SUNDAY *of* LENT

*At once the Spirit drove [Jesus] out into the desert.*

MARK 1:12

**ONE OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS CHARACTERS THAT EVER LIVED IN NEW YORK WAS ORVILLE GARDNER.** He was the trainer of prizefighters and companion to all sorts of hard characters. His reputation was so thoroughly bad that he was nicknamed “Awful Gardner.” He had a son, whom he dearly loved. Unfortunately, his son drowned. A short time after his boy’s death, Orville was standing at the bar in a New York saloon, surrounded by several of his rough companions. The night was sweltering, so he stepped outside to get a little fresh air. As he stood out there, he looked up at the sky. A bright star was shining down upon him. As he looked at the star, he said to himself, “I wonder where my little boy is tonight?” Just as quickly the thought came to him, “Wherever he is, you will never see him again unless you change your life.” This got his attention.

Jesus went into the desert to be with God. We, too, go into the desert. The desert is within us. At Lent we take a good look at ourselves. We don’t play games. We examine our life. Are we living the life that God asks of us? What do we need to change? This Lent—don’t play games. Take these next 40 days seriously. Lent is our invitation to grow in grace. Don’t waste this opportunity.



*Father, may I look upon these next 40 days not as a burden but as a gift. Here is my chance to grow in grace. Here is my chance to be the person you called me to be. Let me not waste these special days. I ask for your grace to make the necessary changes. I ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK *of* LENT

*...upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.* MATTHEW 16:18

**I HEARD SOMEONE TELL THIS STORY:** When a father went with his daughter to visit a prestigious university, the student guide pointed out the nationally ranked library and state-of-the-art science facilities. She told them that the professors were the best in the world, and she recommended his daughter apply early to improve her chances for admission. “We get so many applicants,” she boasted, “because of the stature of the school.”

After the tour, the father asked the guide, “So, why did you choose this school?”

“Oh,” she replied matter-of-factly, “my boyfriend goes here.”

Why am I Catholic? Simply, I believe it is the Church that Christ founded. I believe that despite the weakness of its members, it will survive. Christ will not desert it. The Church is his bride, and God is a faithful lover. Yes, even in these difficult times, I cannot desert the Church. That would be too easy. It would also show my lack of trust in Jesus’ words to Peter. This is *his* Church, and it will survive.



*Father, I thank you for the privilege and honor in being part of your Church. It is incredible that you entrusted your grace to us flawed people. Despite our failings, you promise never to leave us. I will trust in your promise. I just ask that my life honor your Church and bring you praise. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.*

## EASTER SUNDAY *of the* RESURRECTION *of the* LORD

*For they did not yet understand the Scripture  
that he had to rise from the dead. JOHN 20:9*

**IN 2013, CBS 3 TV IN PHILADELPHIA REPORTED A WOMAN TURNED UP ALIVE**, 13 days after her family thought they had buried her. A body identified as Sharolyn Jackson's was buried on August 3, after the Philadelphia Medical Examiner signed the death certificate. But then, on August 16, Jackson—50 years old and very much alive—walked into a mental health facility. The family was stunned and elated, but an investigation needed to be opened to determine who was buried in the grave.

A mistaken identity.

There is no mistake this Easter. Jesus died and he rose.

There is no better news than that. Sharolyn Jackson may be alive, but one day, she will die. We all will. As Christians, we know that is not the end. We will live for eternity with our Lord. Make no mistake about it.

Christ has died; Christ is Risen. *Alleluia!*



*Father, I rejoice today. Your Son, Jesus, rose from the grave. It is not only good news for Jesus, but it is the best news for us! Though we will die, will live for all eternity. Help me, Father, to carry with me the good news of Easter Sunday. Amen.*

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